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In the garden

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IN THE GARDEN

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts

in

The School of Art

by
Christopher B. Hutson
B.F.A., Bradley University, 2002
August, 2005

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ABSTRACT

This body of artwork is centered on the idea of a garden as a space in between the two systems of human and natural order. The ambiguities of this in-between space tie together ideas pertinent to both worlds, using the ancient “doctrine of signatures” as an intermediary. These ideas are explored in fourteen artworks, including large-scale and smaller drawings, lithographs, and etchings.

IN THE GARDEN

The Scarecrows

by Gunter Grass

I don't know whether earth can be bought,
whether it's enough to bury four posts,
with a little rust between them and some shrubs,
in the sand, and call the thing a garden.

I don't know what the starlings think.
Sometimes they flutter up, disperse,
sprinkle my afternoon,
pretend that one can scare them off,
as though scarecrows were scarecrows
and air guns behind the curtains
and cats in the beanrows.

I don't know what the old jackets
and those trouser pockets know about us.
I don't know what broods inside hats,
for what thoughts something is hatched,
and fledges and won't let itself be scared off;
by scarecrows in any case we are guarded.

Are scarecrows mammals?
It does look as though they multiplied
by swapping hats overnight:
already three of them stand in my garden,
bow, and politely wave to me
and turn about and wink at the sun
and talk, talk to the lettuces.

I don't know whether my garden fence
wants to shut me in or out.

I don't know what the weeds want,
don't know what that greenfly signifies,
don't know whether old jackets, old trousers
when with their spoons rusty and tinny
windward they ring, to vespers or ave they ring
or to the insurrection of every scarecrow.¹

Step into the garden.

My family has always had a garden as long as I've been around, and the company of plants is something I've always enjoyed. They are just as alive to me as the animals who cohabit the garden. Now that I am no longer at my family's home, and do not yet own my own land, I keep a number of plants. I watch and have watched my plants grow expectantly, waiting to see what develops, and noting the appearance of new buds and foliage. Certain species and breeds catch my attention and become special favorites of mine.

The act of gardening involves the systematic management of life and death. Whether killing weeds and pests, thinning seedlings, uprooting plants that have served their useful life, or mulching and watering, the gardener as lord of his domain selectively nurtures life and applies death. He decides what must die to aid and secure the development of those things that he chooses to live. Even some of the beings that are nurtured are eventually killed or damaged in harvest, or are injured to direct their growth. All animal life feeds on other life. Plants feed on light, water, and air, and everything else feeds on plants or on other things that eat plants. When plants feel like getting up and walking around, they get themselves eaten, and the simple act of directing a patch of land to produce is an exercise in killing and saving life. Like petty demiurges, we hold power over many little lives that we did not create, but possess the ability to sustain or destroy.

While this idea centers around a small-scale and varied garden, the same ideas extend somewhat to agriculture on a larger scale. However, this imaginary garden is rather a smaller, personal plot. The link between the physical form and the metaphysical purpose of natural things is a good metaphor by which to examine the traits of the garden's inhabitants, and a good base from which to consider the artwork in this thesis.

A garden is a space where two or more systems of order come together, in competition or co-existence. A garden differs from a natural area, and also from a purely architectural or technological space, in that it combines elements of the natural and human worlds, incorporating elements of both or existing between them. This imaginary garden also combines elements of other paired systems, as outlined below.

The magic of this garden lies in its betweenness. It exists in the spaces between, where things are charged with potential. Betweenness corresponds to potential, as a situation existing indistinctly between two known states enjoys the possibility of becoming either, or both, or none. It is free to travel mercurially between possible states of existence, as a magic thing endowed with the power of transformation.

At this point, I must establish what I mean in reference to the human and natural worlds. What I will label "human" will denote anything arranged or produced through human thought or artifice, and that which I refer to as "natural" simply denotes anything non-human.

A garden is a space under cultivation – it is plotted out and organized according to human intentions. The human system of order in cultivation differs in pattern from natural systems of order. Plants in cultivation tend to be situated in more or less clearly defined, segregated layouts, following Euclidean geometry. Natural spaces are far more integrated, with (in most regions) a wide range of disparate organisms mixed together in non-geometric patterns. In a natural system, there is a network of relations between

organisms and cyclical or weblike food chains, whereas a human cultivation system limits these relations and channels the food chain into a vertical orientation terminating with human beings.

A garden plant is not a wild creature. It has, in a majority of cases, been altered by breeding (and, more recently, by direct genetic manipulation) into something different than its wild ancestors. Moreover, these plants are raised under artificial circumstances and trained according to the discretion of the gardener. This cultivation may be as minimal as planting a seed and letting it develop on its own or as extensive as the practice of bonsai, or a modern hydroponic laboratory. At any rate, the act of cultivation is done using the natural plant as raw material and subjecting it to the intentions, abilities, prejudices, and imagination of the gardener. These may be pervasive, as they are in the etching *Bonsai, Cactus, and the Gnome*. Though the garden exists as a neutral zone between the human and natural spheres of influence, there is a continuum between the two – some situations are more natural, and others, as this one, are more artificial. The cactus and bonsai pine could not have grown without their stock preexisting in nature, but everything else is pure artifice, and this, too, is part of the garden. This scene exists on a table indoors or on a windowsill – an outer extension of the garden, but a horticultural space nonetheless. The bonsai is a plant that is completely controlled in its growth, pruned in branch and root and bent by wire, sculpted to the gardener's plan. It is accompanied by a potted cactus and that creepy decoration, the garden gnome. Behind them on the wall hangs a copy of Dürer's *Knight, Death, and the Devil*, the composition of which is echoed by the setup of bonsai, cactus, and gnome. Although it is a cultivated space, the garden is not subject exclusively to human intention, as it exists as an island of human order within a surrounding ocean of natural order, from which it is never perfectly insulated, and often poorly shielded. The natural world seeps into the cultivated garden, and, increasingly, the cultivated organism goes feral and escapes back into nature.

My thinking in these artworks is also of two orders. On one hand, I have a scientific background and a limited but good factual understanding of the kinds, interactions, and behavior of plants and animals. I am as aware as any layman of the scientific realities of my subjects, as currently known. However, while this does a great deal to inform my work, so too does a sort of fanciful or "mythic" thinking, by which the characters are imbued with metaphoric, human, and transformational meaning. This alternate mode of thinking does not correspond to empirically verifiable or falsifiable fact, but rather to a free intuitive process by which gaps in knowledge are filled in with imagination. This is a non-rational, dreamlike association that allows freedom for transformation. This is the side that anthropomorphizes, unconcerned with truth or falsity in any scientific sense.

Just as the garden is not an entirely natural or artificial space, this body of work is likewise not a series of perfectly naturalistic scenes. While they are based on representational and more or less naturalistic depiction of the beings and objects involved, the natural image comes under the cultivation of my human mind and is altered. Most things are drawn from memory, using photographs, live specimens, and diagrams for reference when necessary. They are not intended to be scientific illustrations, but images of the garden and its denizens colored by my memory and imagination. Many figures are also drawn in an illusory three-dimensional space, while others and the spaces

around them dissolve into a flat or ambiguous imaginary space. Detailed “highlights” of markmaking share surfaces with “shadows” of undefined value. This ambiguous space, corresponding to the dreamlike mythic order, is not bound by the laws that operate in the normal reality portrayed in the more straightforward depictions. It can hide and transmogrify things, and pieces of imaginary matter may occupy the same imaginary space. The clustered grouping of pieces in the exhibition suggests the organization of the garden around a central point where the observer stands, and presents the clusters as integrated but heterogenous islands with contacts between them suggested by the reaching and connecting roots.

As stated, the garden cannot be cut off completely from the natural world around it, and it is infiltrated by external natural agencies. Animals are not often placed intentionally in the garden, and are often actively deterred. In most cases, whether beneficial, harmful, or neutral, they find their way into the garden regardless of human help or hindrance. Some are intentionally placed, as in the introduction of cats or predatory insects to combat pests, or of earthworms to improve the soil. In some cases, infiltration is invited, as when plants are chosen for their attractiveness to favored animals such as butterflies or certain birds. In *The Very Hungry Caterpillars*, the title characters voraciously devour the plants they sit on. Among the many insect pests that are typically the nemeses of any gardener, caterpillars are singular. Those varieties that become desirable butterflies are tolerated by many gardeners, and in some cases actively encouraged by planting their favorite foods to attract them. Others, such as cabbage butterfly, tomato hornworm, and tent caterpillar, are destructive pests that few gardeners want. These caterpillars, as many do, feed mainly on aromatic, bitter, or poisonous plants like milkweed or such umbellifers as fennel or dill. By doing so, they incorporate the toxic or unpalatable chemistry of their victims into their own bodies, like cannibal tribesmen who eat a slain enemy to assimilate his strength and courage. This provides them with protection from predation and preserves something of the spirit of the eaten in the eater. The idea that taking a part or image of something in some way imbues the taker with some of the attributes of the taken is pertinent to this body of work. The idea that a thing’s attributes are persistent or transferable is an old one. Among others, Giambattista della Porta, who wrote on the doctrine of signatures, espoused it. “Moreover,” he wrote, “some natural things have not only such properties in themselves, but they are apt also to communicate them unto others.”² He goes on to give the example of an iron ring in contact with a magnet, becoming magnetic itself. This idea is important as a continuation of work I was doing previously, in which the piece of artwork stands as a kind of talisman.

Some infiltrators, such as pollinators, are absolutely necessary for many plants. Bees are the most obvious example: regard *The Hive*, where the commie sorority of bees goes about its business, with one incoming squadron carrying in pollen and nectar to feed themselves and the next generation sleeping in their cells, and another squadron unloaded and outgoing, to gather more of the same. They dance around the queen, who holds a bee’s favorite thing: a flower. This chrysanthemum is a member of the asteraceae, or compositae – that largest and arguably most advanced family of dicotyledons – a family characterized by, among other things, a composite flower wherein what appears to be one

flower is in fact an aggregate of many tiny ones, all working together to give the illusion of one larger bloom. One of D.H. Lawrence's characters in *Women in Love* described it as "a perfect little democracy, so it's the highest of flowers, hence its charm."³ This is a signifier, a mirror of the beehive, whose members act cooperatively as though they were the organs of one big animal. In the same way, the multiple pieces of work in this thesis add up to the greater totality of the garden. Of course, pollinators need not be bees – flies, birds, butterflies, bats, and the wind all do their part too. In *Liquor in the Front*, a cluster of trumpet creeper flowers is approached by a hummingbird, with a bee trailing close behind. They cooperate with the plant in the act of pollination – a gustatory act for the animals in search of sweet nectar, but a sexual act for the plant, as the bill of the bird and the tufted legs of the bee penetrate first this flower and then others, carrying its pollen to them.

Pest animals, whether insect, bird, or mammal, may be highly destructive, particularly in vegetable gardens. There, plants are densely situated among their own kind, and the bitter agents and poisons that deter insect and human alike have often been bred out of the plant. Other than animal pests, the gardener's archenemies are weeds. The criteria that make a plant a weed are nebulous and indistinct, but a basic definition may be put forth: a weed is any plant that is not planted by or growing in accordance with the intentions of the gardener. They enter the garden of their own accord and compete for resources with the purposefully grown plants. Some plants are weeds wherever they occur, some are weeds according to matters of personal preference, and some otherwise desirable plants may be weeds when growing out of order. Some weeds may be dangerous or annoying to the gardener himself, as well as to his charges.

The gardener must kill these weeds to protect his desired plants, by cutting them down, uprooting, or poisoning them. *A Man of Words and not of Deeds...* is like a garden full of weeds. Here a red triangle is described by the three main characters of Heron, Weed Knife, and Dandelion. The heron meets the gaze of the weed knife, which floats above that archetypal weed, the dandelion, like the sword of Damocles, ambiguously falling or hovering. The heron and knife each acknowledge their likeness unto the other, their sharp beaks poised to patiently deal death for the benefit of their master. Meanwhile, the wind carries off the sparkling seeds of the dandelion as the undesired plants quietly insinuate themselves in their war of attrition against the gardener's watchful eye and deadly hand. A related process is that of thinning, by which a surplus of seeds is sown to insure the germination of a satisfactory number. Young plants are then selectively killed from the surplus population, as they would strain the resources of the limited space if left to develop. These processes of thinning and weeding may relate to my method of working, whereby a drawing or print will typically begin with an abundance of intuitive gestural marks and, layer by layer, be refined into the finished product. This is not a causal relationship, but a reflection, a coincidence between the subject and the form.

While the cultivated space has always been infiltrated by the natural world, the reverse has also been true with increasing frequency. Organisms altered, bred, or introduced by humans escape back into nature and alter the natural world with which they come in contact. The prevalence of exotic species, invasive or not, and their effect upon their new environment attests to this, as does the recently observed phenomenon of

transgenic crops breeding with wild or more traditionally bred populations. Occasionally, plants within the garden damage one another. The black walnut in *Another Man's Poison* is an allopath – it secretes poison from its roots in an attempt to kill nearby plants that compete for limited resources. As it provides food for humans and animals, it chokes the plants near it, making exception for the tenacious poison ivy vine that climbs its trunk. Giambattista della Porta, in his *Natural Magick*, maintains that the attributes of many living things remain in their bodies after death, citing several dubious examples as proof.⁴ In this case, though, his theory may hold true. The walnut retains its aggressive nature in death, for its wood, of course, is the favored material for rifle stocks.

From ancient times and worldwide, and persisting to this day in places, there has been a popular belief that has come to be described by western sources as “the doctrine of signatures.” This is the belief that God or nature has encoded symbols into the forms of natural things, to teach the human race the meaning or use of these things. The sixteenth-century physician, alchemist, and proto-scientist Paracelsus wrote of this then-prevalent theory: “We men discover everything that lies hidden in the mountains by external signs and correspondences, and thus also do we find all the properties of herbs and everything that is in the stones. There is nothing in the depths of the seas, nothing on the heights of the firmament, that man is unable to discover. No mountain, no cliff, is so vast as to hide or conceal what is in it from the eyes of man; it is revealed to him by corresponding signs.”⁵ This theory has given the most attention to plants, using likenesses to human anatomy or disease to identify medicinal herbs, but it was also applied to animals, minerals, and such, and even bears relation to the ancient astrological idea that the forms depicted in constellations give clues to the nature of their influence.

To cite a few examples: goldenrod was thought to cure jaundice, as evidenced by its yellow flowers, and mullein was known to be beneficial to the lungs by the pulmonary shape of its leaves. The name of the popular root ginseng is derived from the Chinese name meaning “man root,” as the often humanlike shape of the rhizome was thought to be a sign of its beneficial effect on the whole body. Across the world, Mohawks applied similar thinking to the American ginseng and named it similarly. Paracelsus, later in the same text as cited above, wrote of *Orchis morio*, the Mediterranean orchid depicted in *Indomitable Ballsiness*, “Behold the *Satyrium* root, is it not formed like the male privy parts? No one can deny this. Accordingly magic discovered it and revealed that it can restore a man's virility and passion.”⁶ Again, the signature is responsible for the name: Paracelsus calls the plant satyrium, after the famously virile mythical creatures, and it is also the original, eponymous orchid, giving the name to all of its kin, after the Greek *orchis*, meaning “testicle.”

A non-medical application of this idea may be seen in the name of the passion flower, which was interpreted by Jesuit missionaries as symbolic of Christ's passion and as natural affirmation of their cause in the Americas: The five petals and five sepals represent the ten faithful apostles, the corona is the crown of thorns, the five stamens are Christ's wounds, the three styles the three nails, and the grasping tendrils of the vine the whips. As it was not confined to the practice of medicine, I am using this as a system by which to use natural shapes and properties as significant of other things.

Roots run everywhere in these drawings, and I have exposed them as though the earth was transparent, so that their presence is visible. Roots are a plant's secret half. There is an invisible bulk of every plant running long and deep under the ground. In plants of the prairie or desert, this root system may make up the great majority of the plant's body, exceeding the aboveground portion. This hidden part is a physical mirror, a signature of the hidden, secret, and subconscious parts of every sentient being. Roots are a basis and a grounding for the plant as well. They are a feeding and absorption system, a network of conduits that pump water out of the earth, through the plant, and into the sky. They are the support system for the remainder of the plant that we see.

Roots are also a system of connection, a metaphor or signature for the web of possibilities, associations, and relations in my garden. Roots can spread new shoots of the plant, connecting seemingly disconnected trunks. They fuse with symbiotic mycorrhizal filaments connecting them with every other plant in their vicinity. The depictions of roots, as well as the rootlike tendrils extending from the painted forms on the gallery wall, visually suggest this concept of interconnection. Ideas, concepts, and relationships of information stretch out points of connection with one another and branch off down different possible pathways. The roots extending from the shapes that circumscribe the clusters of work in my garden suggest that, like the plants whose roots meet or are joined by fungal filaments, the individual pieces are not entirely self-contained units, but correspond and relate to their neighbors. They also relate to the concept of betweenness, as they reach out into the spaces between pieces, and between organisms.

Seeds, too, appear often in the work, as well as seedlike or beanlike shapes. Seeds are capsules of potential. A seed contains all the structure of the mature plant dormant within it and needs only the right conditions to impose that structure on matter. The beanlike formal module throughout many of the pieces is a pleasing shape to me and suggests a potential or dormant power.

Soil is the substrate and raw material in which the garden exists. As a direct connection between soil and artwork, the predominant colors are browns and soil pigments, particularly iron oxides and carbon blacks, where the drawings and prints are actually made from earth, or at least look as if they were. The soil is the subject of the lithograph *The Dirtworkers*. Here, the detritus of the garden is recycled, transformed from the dead husks of living organs into the matrix from which it originally drew its own matter. The earthworms and fungi, with bacterial and nematodal shapes lurking in the wings, disassemble the complex structures of leaf and bone into the carbon and minerals of which they are made. Insects pursue their business through the soil, and a bean germinates, ready to fix free diatomic nitrogen into the soil as nitrates from which the plants may build new proteins.

Although the human element and presence is important in this work, the direct depiction of human form is absent, as it would prove intrusive and dominate the images in terms of content. Rather, the human presence is pictured through the use of human artifacts as characters and stand-ins for the real human animal. Though recent findings show that is no longer our exclusive domain, tool use has long been considered as a defining characteristic of humanity. Certainly we are the creatures that make the most extensive, advanced, and varied use of tools, and the act of gardening involves an

assortment of tools. Thereby, the tools and artifacts in the pictures are us, we are them, and they are themselves. These tools and artifacts may also take on some semblance of their master's personality, or begin to acquire their own. In the tale "El Encuentro" by Jorge Luis Borges, two knives belonging to long-dead enemies use two other men to see their battle through to completion.⁷ The surgeon Richard Selzer wrote similarly of his scalpel: "One holds the knife back as much as it advances to purpose. One is master of the scissors. One is partner, sometimes rival, to the knife."⁸

In the etching *The Riddle of Steel*, a steel shovel and beer can stuck in the ground decay into part of the very soil that holds them, as weeds wind around and through them and they become the nesting places of insects. The irony here is that while steel implements are designed to perform such tasks as dig soil, chop wood, or carry water, they may be destroyed by long exposure to the very elements that they are made to have power over. In the film *Conan the Barbarian*, Conan seeks to answer the Riddle of Steel: "Steel is stronger than flesh, but what is stronger than steel?" This riddle is later answered by the villain, who tells him, "Steel isn't strong, boy, flesh is stronger! ...what is steel, compared to the hand that wields it?"⁹ Paradoxically, the solution is that while steel is stronger than flesh, flesh too is stronger than steel. In this picture, the implements, having been removed from duty, once again become inert steel, subject to reabsorption by the natural world. A shovel driven by a human hand can command soil, and a steel can may contain water, but a shovel and can left alone will be assimilated by soil and water.

The connection between man and artifact also exists in human thought as the relationship between a creator and his or her creation. Most religions place mankind itself as an artifact of sorts, the work and invention of a powerful being that creates things as a human does. The Abrahamic religions regard man as created in the image of his creator, albeit with somewhat reduced capacities. The effect trickles down, and a thing made by a human creator often bears the imprint of its maker. In the appreciation of art, the identity of the maker often has a great deal to do with the identity of the created object. When the maker is not an individual, but an abstract creator named Mankind, its creations inevitably bear a certain humanness. In the act of creating artwork, the artist and his tools often merge identities, or the tool becomes an extension of the artist. When I am drawing, the seat of my mind is in my hand, and its focus resides at the point of the tool. My pencils and printmaking tools are analogous to the human stand-ins in the artwork, in its making. In the end, the connection between creator, artifact, and environment goes deep. In *What We've Got Here is a Failure to Communicate*, the ineffectual scarecrow stands among ripening corn and pumpkins, and is not bothered by the crows' indifference to him. He does his best, but the crows know by now that his best can't hurt them. He is, in fact, bound to them and the pumpkin vine mysteriously, and the only difference between a vine and a vein is a vowel.

The Earthworm
by Harry Martinson

Who really respects the earthworm,
the farmworker far under the grass in the soil.
He keeps the earth always changing.
He works entirely full of soil,
speechless with soil, and blind.
He is the underneath farmer, the underground one,
where the fields are getting on their harvest clothes.
Who really respects him,
this deep and calm earth-worker,
this deathless, gray, tiny farmer in the planet's soil.¹⁰

NOTES

- ¹ Gunter Grass, *Selected Poems 1956-1993*. (London, Faber and Faber, 1999) pp. 27-28.
- ² Giambattista della Porta, *Natural Magick*. (New York, Basic Books, 1957) p. 19.
- ³ D.H. Lawrence, *Women in Love*. (New York, Random House, 1922) p. 148.
- ⁴ Giambattista della Porta, *Natural Magick*. (New York, Basic Books, 1957) p. 20.
- ⁵ Paracelsus, *Selected Writings*. (New York, Pantheon, 1951) p. 194.
- ⁶ Paracelsus, *Selected Writings*. (New York, Pantheon, 1951) p. 196.
- ⁷ Jorge Luis Borges, *Collected Fictions*. (New York, Viking Penguin, 1998) pp.364-369
- ⁸ Richard Selzer, *Mortal Lessons: Notes on the Art of Surgery*. (New York, Simon and Schuster, 1976) p. 101.
- ⁹ John Milius, dir. *Conan The Barbarian*. Universal Studios, 1982.
- ¹⁰ Robert Bly, trans. *Friends, You Drank Some Darkness: Three Swedish Poets*. (Boston, Beacon Press, 1975) p. 53.

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IMAGES



What We've Got Here is a Failure to Communicate
drawing on masonite, 4x8'



A Man of Words and Not of Deeds...
drawing on masonite, 4x8'



Another Man's Poison
drawing on masonite, 4x8'



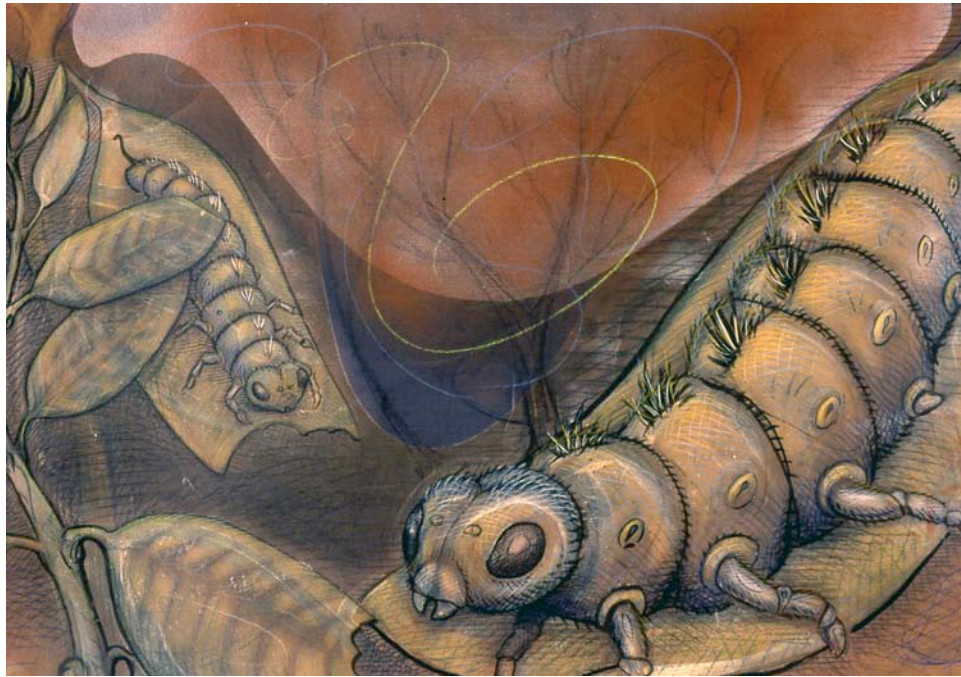
Winter
drawing on masonite, 3x4'



Strung Up
Drawing on paper, 25x36"



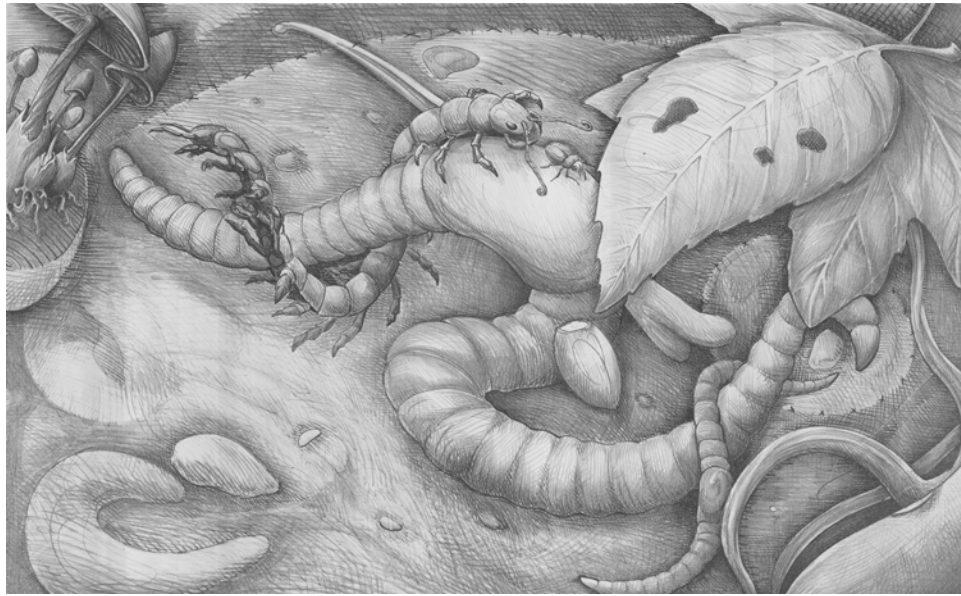
Indomitable Ballsiness
Drawing on paper, 23x35"



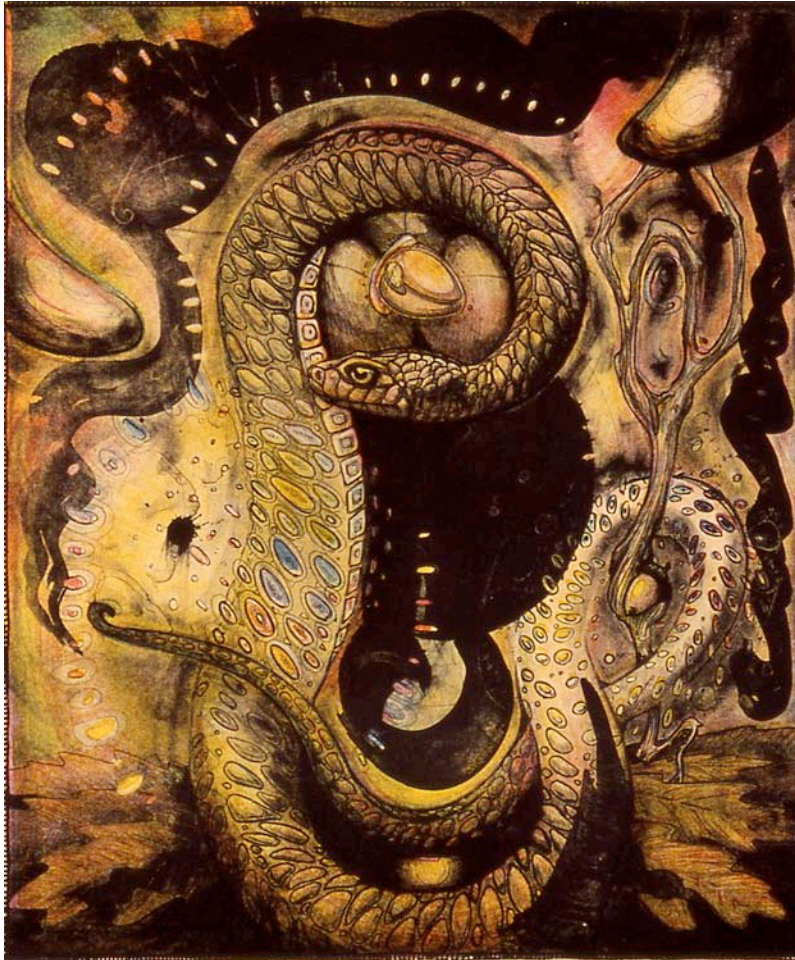
The Very Hungry Caterpillars
Drawing on paper, 31x21"



Rattlesnake Masters
Drawing on paper, 21x30"



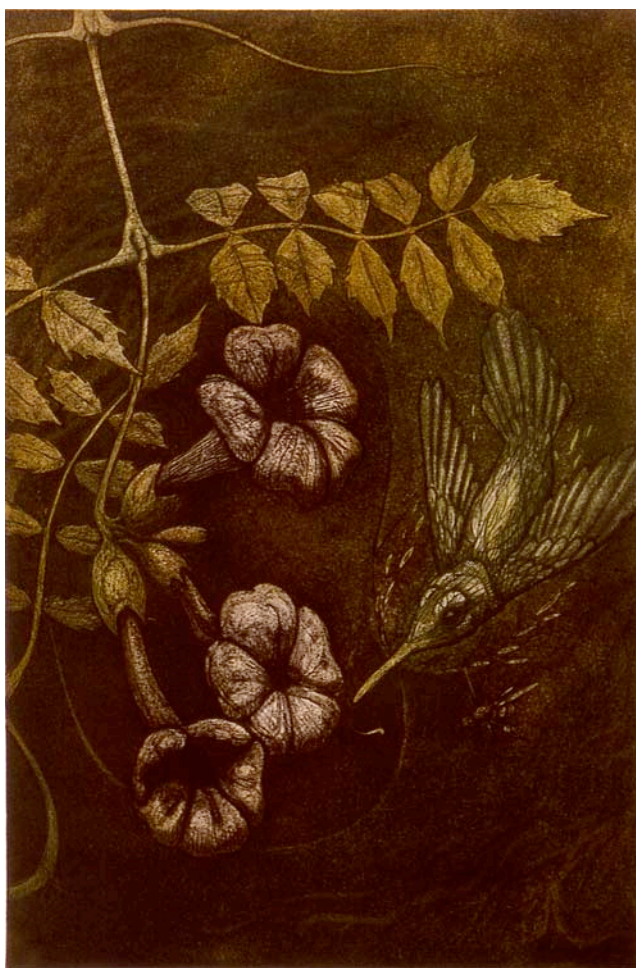
Dirtworkers
Lithograph, 31x19"



Rainbow Snake
Lithograph, 15x18"



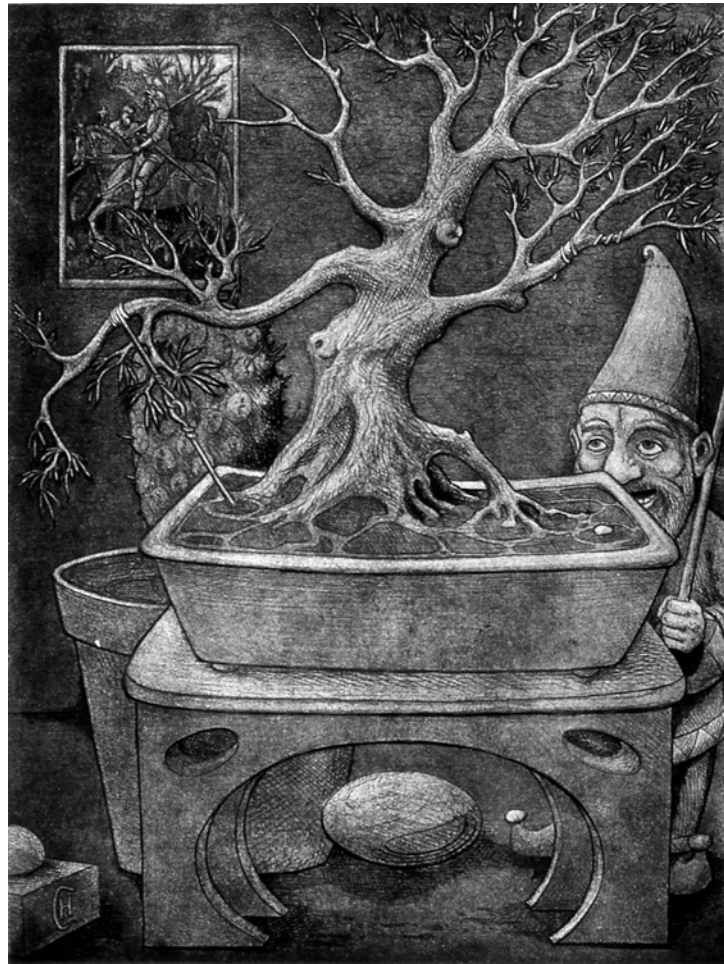
The Hive
Lithograph, 15x19"



Liquor in the Front
Intaglio, 12x18"



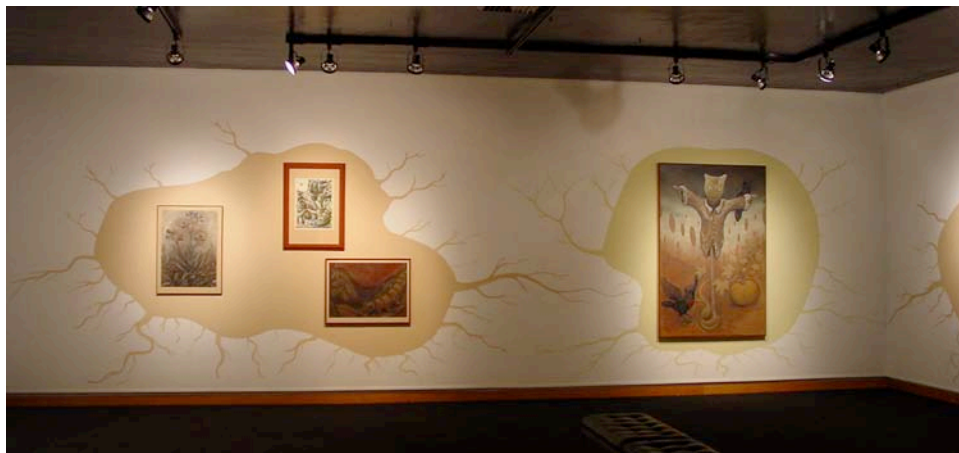
The Riddle of Steel
Intaglio, 12x17"



Bonsai, Cactus, and the Gnome
Intaglio, 13x17"



Gallery Photographs



Gallery photographs

VITA

Christopher Hutson was born in 1980 and grew up in Downers Grove, Illinois, where he got off to an early start drawing the best dinosaurs and space battles at Whittier elementary school. He went on to receive a bachelor of Fine Arts degree from Bradley University in Peoria, Illinois, in May of 2002, and thence to Louisiana State University, where he will earn a Master of Fine Arts degree in August of 2005.